

Fewer teens are giving birth, but cost to taxpayers still steep

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By Wendy Koch, USA TODAY

Teen childbearing has declined sharply since the early 1990s but remains costly to U.S. taxpayers, incurring a tab of at least \$9.1 billion in 2004, according to a report released Monday.

The children of teen mothers have higher health care, foster care and incarceration costs than those of older parents, says the report commissioned by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, a non-profit advocacy group. Like their parents, they earn less as adults and pay less in taxes.

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"It's important to remind people the problems are very serious and expensive," says Sarah Brown, the group's director. She welcomes a one-third decline from 62 births per 1,000 teen girls in 1991 to 41 births in 2004. She attributes the drop to social changes that have led teens to use contraception or abstain from sex.

The abortion rate dropped even more, from 37 abortions per 1,000 teen girls in 1991 to 22 in 2002, the last year for which figures are available, according to the Guttmacher Institute, a non-profit organization that studies sexual and reproductive health policy.

Still, Brown says, the teen birth rate is four to five times the rate in much of Europe and more than twice that of Canada. "We can't let this nation think everything's been done," she says, noting the rate of decline has slowed.

The report, *By the Numbers: The Public Costs of Teen Childbearing*, looks only at costs clearly linked to a teen birth rather than associated risks such as poverty. Written by Saul Hoffman, an economics professor at the University of Delaware, it is based largely on 2004 data that have not been publicized.

Most of the costs in 2004 — \$8.6 billion — were incurred by mothers 17 and younger. Compared with women who have a first child at 20 or 21, those girls are more than twice as likely to have a child placed in foster care, to be reported for child abuse or neglect, and to have a son sent to prison. Their kids are far more likely to drop out of high school and their daughters to become teen mothers themselves, the report states.

"Teen birth rates drive a lot of negative social indicators," says Wade Horn, assistant secretary for children and families at the Health and Human Services Department.

The report says the 2004 costs of teen childbearing include \$1.9 billion for health care, \$2.3 billion for child welfare, \$2.1 billion for incarceration and \$2.9 billion in lower tax revenue. That federal, state and local tab is offset slightly by family support for younger teens. The cost to government averages \$1,430 per child per year.

The price tag varies by state, depending on the number of births and benefit levels, from \$12 million in Vermont to \$1 billion in Texas.

Teen birth rates generally have fallen since 1957 but rose in the late 1980s. The subsequent drop saved taxpayers an estimated \$6.7 billion nationally in 2004, the report says. The savings ranged from more than \$1 billion in California to \$5 million in Wyoming.

The report updates a 1996 study on the costs of teen childbearing but is the first to provide state-by-state costs.